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ABSTRACT

School administrators should realize that independent reading is an important and integral part of the language arts program, that it takes into consideration important skills and strategies, and that it requires risk-taking in a supportive environment. Principals can provide such support by working cooperatively with teachers during every phase of implementation. Suggestions to support independent reading involve: (1) developing positive feelings toward independent reading among teachers and administrators; (2) implementing schoolwide efforts or a modified plan to use school time effectively for sustained reading throughout the school year; (3) improving vocabulary through reading immersion; and (4) organizing demonstration activities to help readers gain contextual insights. The suggestions are only a sampling of the many ways in which administrators and teachers can promote worthwhile activities for students. Unless these and other approaches are considered seriously, students and future society will probably not fulfill the ultimate goal of independent, lifelong learning. (A figure presenting a model of a student's yearlong schedule that includes independent reading is included.) (RS)

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Successful Independent Reading Depends on the Principal's Support

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The importance of independent reading in the schools cannot be underscored enough. Providing school time for the actual reading of pleasurable materials can enrich the content areas while it promotes the lifetime reading habit. Unfortunately, independent reading is competing with dominant trends that could negate or displace its value. For example, the competency testing movement and the national standards initiative may be interpreted as driving forces that dictate the school curriculum. Thus, as administrators and teachers, we might be coerced into focusing on instructional activities and resources that accommodate expected outcomes.

Rather than succumb to external mandates, we should pursue a balance that not only considers the mandates but also supports lifelong literacy. Without such a balance, many students may be able to meet isolated expectations but will be unable or unwilling to enjoy reading as a lifetime activity. Our schools, therefore, could become the breeding grounds for a future society of aliterates.

We can prevent this catastrophe by providing our students with a context that promotes long-term literacy through independent reading. Not surprisingly, the administrator becomes a key player since the type of support he or she gives can mean the difference between dynamic or mediocre outcomes. To be effective, the administrator should believe in the value of independent reading and should work with teachers in credible ways to carry out this worthwhile innovation.

What follows are suggestions that support a sense of cooperation between the administrator and the teachers. These suggestions are not prescriptive, nor do they preclude other important activities and strategies already occurring in classrooms. Rather, they are intended to complement our students' literacy learning so that they not only learn to read but also want to read.

Independent reading is important

For independent reading to be a success, we must strongly believe in its worth. Regrettably, we seem to be a major stumbling block that has prevented this innovation from achieving its full potential in the schools. In a related study published in the winter 1986 issue of Reading Research and Instruction, Lesley Mandel Morrow found that principals, teachers, and parents consider voluntary or independent reading to be less important than word recognition, comprehension, and study skills.

If independent reading is to be considered a major part of the instructional program, then we must first develop positive feelings about it. The principal's leadership is a major factor in creating favorable attitudes. During faculty meetings (or staff development sessions), the principal can highlight agenda items concerning the importance of lifetime literacy. Included in these discussions is reference to the professional literature including such valuable information as independent reading provides a practical context for applying skills, it enhances fluency of connected text, it promotes a sense of ownership, and it supports the lifelong reading habit. When reprints of the

pertinent literature are distributed to the faculty at least a week before each meeting, the staff is more likely to bring reflective thought to the faculty discussion.

Talking about independent reading, however, is easier than carrying out this worthwhile idea. As educators, we also need direct involvement with independent reading. For example, establishing a classroom library consisting of materials written at varied reading and interest levels and motivating students to read silently during school time are only two types of involvement that reinforce the importance of independent reading. Principals who support this type of participation among teachers go beyond the rhetoric of independent reading by demonstrating leadership commitment to this innovation.

Using school time effectively

The administrator's serious treatment of independent reading and the staff's improved feelings toward supporting it set the foundation for promoting lifetime reading. Depending on the limitations of the school, we may carry out schoolwide efforts or a modified plan.

In supporting efforts on a large scale, the principal encourages all teachers to use at least five-week blocks of time for sustained reading during the entire school year(see Figure 1). Thus, if this comprehensive approach is applied to each student's instructional schedule, a typical student may have independent reading in social studies during the first 5 weeks of

school and regular classroom instruction for the rest of the school year. The same individual may also have independent reading in English during the next five weeks and conventional instruction before and after that time period. Thus, as the student progresses with this approach from September to June, he or she experiences a wide variety of pleasurable resources across the curriculum. This exposure has the potential for developing flexibility in reading about different topics and also for establishing the foundation for the lifetime reading habit. For more discussion about schoolwide efforts, please refer to my article which appears in the January 1988 Journal of Reading.

Although these comprehensive efforts have merit, they may not fit the needs of a particular school. The principal and teachers therefore have the option of pursuing a modified plan. For example, while considering the daily school-related pressures, we can explore realistic ways of incorporating independent reading in the classroom. One consideration is to obtain materials for a classroom minilibrary related to a unit of study. Our students would then be encouraged to select materials in which they are interested and to read them during the last part of each lesson. Another consideration is to scrutinize the practice of requiring exercises in workbooks, activities in the teacher's manual, and routines in weekly plans. Instead, only necessary assignments should be stressed so that more school time is available for enjoying books. These and other practical considerations are suggested by Dixie Lee Spiegel in her classic work Reading for Pleasure: Guidelines(IRA, 1981).

Whether the staff pursues schoolwide efforts or a modified plan, the library media specialist becomes a major source of support. This invaluable professional can help us with the selection of materials for classroom and mini-classroom libraries. The librarian can also motivate our students to read for pleasure through book talks, read alouds, and storytelling. In working cooperatively with the teaching and library staff, the administrator is not only treating independent reading as a major instructional activity but also helping to plant the seeds of lifetime literacy for future generations.

Vocabulary through reading immersion

An established independent reading program sets the stage for incorporating vocabulary with materials our students are reading. Through experience, we intuitively assume that students with extensive word knowledge are more likely to read with understanding and fluency. While realizing the importance of this relationship, we are sometimes unsure about the best approaches and the amount of time and energy needed for effective instruction.

Part of this uncertainty lies in several seemingly contradictory findings. In reviewing these findings, William Nagy (Teaching Vocabulary to Improve Reading Comprehension, IRA, 1988) reminds us that students must have a varied and deep knowledge of vocabulary for effective comprehension of text. Yet, if we were to engage learners in intensive vocabulary instruction, this approach would be time consuming and would result in the learning of a minimal number of words. In fact,

teachers who attempt explicit coverage of all new words in basal readers will probably teach less than 500 words each year. Since average students in grades 3-12 gain an awareness of about 3000 words per year, apparently much vocabulary is learned incidentally through other means, such as the reading of school materials without direct instructional intervention. In addition, common sense suggests that too much emphasis on intensive teaching of word meanings may displace other important activities, including reading for pleasure.

These findings are not as contradictory as they are complementary, especially if we guide students to link vocabulary with reading immersion. Although this approach is no guarantee that individuals will improve their vocabulary, Nagy suggests that extensive reading provides three essential properties of vocabulary instruction: integration, repetition, and meaningful use. The essence of integration is that knowledge is structured by sets of relationships and that readers comprehend new information by relating it to their prior knowledge. Repetition is important because the more exposure and facility readers have with words the more attention they give to comprehension. Providing students with substantial exposure to new words, however, is especially effective if students use the words meaningfully. Thus, dealing with words in context is more beneficial than merely defining the words in isolation.

The administrator can support these characteristics by encouraging teachers to provide school time for reading a wide variety of books. Similar to the above suggestions, the

principal works with the staff in large scale or low-key efforts. The emphasis, however, is on stimulating students' word knowledge in the natural context of reading materials. One way of accomplishing this goal is to devote part of faculty meetings and informal conferences to discussions about the teaching and learning of vocabulary through meaningful immersion in books. The teachers probably will be delighted that their instructional leader is not concerned with teaching skills in isolation to accommodate external pressures, such as competency testing requirements, media coverage of testing results, and board of education and parental expectations concerning skill development. Instead, both the principal and the staff reinforce their confidence that students learn vocabulary more effectively by experiencing words in a variety of meaningful contexts. This approach, of course, is not intended to take the place of explicit vocabulary instruction. Sensitive teachers work cooperatively with their students in deciding when word knowledge needs to be taught directly and when it is learned adequately through book immersion.

Demonstration activities that support context

As our students immerse themselves in silent reading and simultaneously expand their word knowledge through context, we may vary this classroom approach by demonstrating interesting ways in which context plays a major role in vocabulary development. The principal can help by engaging in mutual lesson planning with teachers before classroom instruction. This process is an adaptation of the planning phase of clinical

supervision, and it is useful here for organizing demonstration activities for passages to be read by students. The staff is therefore prepared to engage in contextual strategies while students follow along with a transparency, duplicated materials, books, or other resources. The purpose of these demonstration strategies is to help readers gain contextual insights, such as the following:

A. Certain words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs help to determine the meaning of some new words and concepts. The teacher thinks aloud as he/she attempts to grasp the meaning of a key word through its context. Here, the teacher notes that context may be helpful in making an inference concerning peripheral rather than explicit meaning. He/She also suggests that peripheral meaning is probably sufficient for understanding the whole selection. Then, the teacher encourages students to use context while reading their own books.

B. Reading whole selections increases an awareness that thorough knowledge of all words is unimportant. The teacher reads a passage aloud and indicates that he/she is unsure of certain word meanings. Then the teacher says, "Instead of trying to figure them out, I am going to put light marks by these words and to continue reading." At the completion of the selection, the teacher summarizes the author's ideas and discusses the marked words. "Do I know what these words are now?" "What about the words I am still unsure of?" "Are these important for understanding the selection?" The

teacher then shows that many of the words he/she already knows incidentally, that some of the words still causing difficulty may or may not be necessary for understanding the passage, and that context is not always helpful in determining the meaning of new words. Decisions, therefore, have to be made, and approaches to gaining the meaning of some words have to be considered. Jo Anne Vacca, Richard Vacca, and Mary Gove (Reading and Learning to Read, Boston: Little, Brown, 1987) suggest strategies of this type be used by students for word identification purposes. These strategies, however, can also be employed by us for demonstrating an awareness that knowing the meaning of all words in a selection is unnecessary for comprehension. After the demonstration, our students gain additional benefits from guided practice until they are able to use context discriminatingly.

C. Context can support other approaches to learning unfamiliar words independently. The teacher carefully selects a passage with words consisting of prefixes, roots, and suffixes that do not reveal meaning on the basis of word structure. Nagy provides a striking example: "knowing that abs means 'away from' and tract means 'to draw, pull' is not likely to help a student encountering the word abstract for the first time." After selecting the passage, the teacher reads it aloud and attempts to determine the meaning of key words through their word parts. When this fails, context is used as another option or strategy for determining the word

meanings. The teacher reminds students that although word structure is an important strategy for independent word learning, context is also useful and complementary especially when word parts do not provide clues to intended meanings. Students are then motivated to use context during independent reading as a support system for unlocking the meaning of words.

D. For comprehension to occur, vocabulary and prior knowledge must interact. The classroom teacher can help students to activate their prior knowledge (or schemata) of a text by using a variation of a prereading plan referred to as PReP (see Judith Langer, Journal of Reading, November 1981. For example, the teacher thinks aloud indicating that before reading the book, he/she is going to skim and become aware of the title and subtitles as well as the key words, phrases, and pictures. Then, the teacher says, "I am going to say anything that comes to my mind when I see the word _____." For the purpose of clarification, responses are placed on the chalkboard. Afterward, the teacher says, "I want to think more deeply about these responses." Thus, certain words are weighed, accepted, revised, rejected, or integrated. Finally, the teacher says, "Based on these thoughts and before I read my book, do I have any new ideas about _____?" Here, more elaboration, revision, or refinement is noted. Although PReP is intended as a teacher-directed activity, our appropriate demonstration of this strategy can encourage

our students to use a variation for the purpose of integrating their prior knowledge with their self-selected text. As with other approaches that focus on context, guided practice is essential.

E. The intonation a reader brings to a text can affect the importance and meaning of words. Pitch, stress, and juncture are aspects of intonation that determine a reader's interpretation of text. Carl Lefevre, in Linguistics and the Teaching of Reading (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), provides a classic example: "I did not say you stole my red bandanna." In this sentence, when the word I is highlighted, the implied meaning is "someone else said it." Conversely, when the word you is emphasized, the interpretation is likely to be "someone else stole it." We can increase our students' sensitivity to intonation by demonstrating its use while reading aloud. Since intonational patterns are especially useful for interpreting dialogue, we may select dialogues from a book and highlight specific words. Our students are then challenged to make inferences about intended meanings and to apply this skill to their own books. Our students also should have opportunities to practice the skill with different materials in varied content areas. Linking intonation with word meaning reflects one of the basic linguistic principles which views text as an implicit representation of speech. Students who are frequently exposed to this process gain important insights concerning the comprehension act.

These five demonstration approaches support the role of context for expanding vocabulary development. We should be aware, however, that these approaches are most effective when our students believe they can imitate them and actually want to imitate them. We also should be cautious about overdoing demonstration activities since they could displace independent reading and negate its philosophy. Overall, what we need to provide is a balance of encouraging wide and varied reading as much as possible and of using demonstration at appropriate times in clear, motivational ways.

Summary

Administrators should realize that independent reading is an important and integral part of the language arts program, that it takes into consideration important skills and strategies, and that it requires risk-taking in a supportive environment. Principals can provide such support by working cooperatively with teachers during every phase of implementation. The suggestions presented here are only a sampling of the many ways in which we can promote worthwhile activities for students. Unless these and other approaches are considered seriously, our students and our future society will probably not fulfill the ultimate goal of independent, lifelong learning.

Figure 1

Model of a Student's Yearlong Schedule That Includes Independent Reading*

	First Progress Period		Second Progress Period		Third Progress Period		Fourth Progress Period	
1. Social Studies	IR							
2. English		IR						
3. Phys. Ed.			*					
4. Science				IR				
5. Mathematics					IR			
6. Lunch						*		
7. For. Language							IR	
8. Elective								IR

Note - Each box represents five weeks

IR - Independent Reading

____ - Traditional Instruction

* - In this schedule, independent reading is not included in the areas of physical education and lunch, since physical education is offered twice a week and lunch is not an instructional period. These areas, however, are appropriately spaced so that no gap in free reading is longer than 5 weeks. Thus, the student experiences independent reading in all four 10-week progress periods.

* Adopted from Sanacore (1988)